

BOOK REVIEWS

A Place of Honour: Reaching Out to Students at Risk in Ontario Catholic Schools

Tony Cosentino & Joe Bezzina

Catholic Association of Religious and Family Life Educators of Ontario, 2008

36 pages

Reviewed by Maureen Kenny

A Place of Honour: Reaching Out to Students at Risk in Ontario Catholic Schools, authored by Tony Cosentino of the Renfrew County Catholic School Board and Joe Bezzina of the London District Catholic School Board of Ontario, Canada, was written to serve as a resource for Catholic educators in Ontario in their efforts to serve a growing at-risk student population. More specifically, the document seeks to explicate the distinctive aspects of Catholic education that are particularly relevant in working with those youth who are most in need of quality educational services. Although the document was formulated for a specific purpose and population, the vision and rationale described in the paper offer principles useful to educators everywhere, particularly those in Catholic education.

This volume was written for Catholic educators in Ontario to assist them in fulfilling their “dual mandate” to implement the directives from the provincial Ministry of Education and to remain accountable to the Catholic faith community. The Ministry of Education has called upon the schools to “Build Pathways to Success” for at-risk youth in Grades 7 to 12 so that students will complete high school and make a successful transition into the world of work. Cosentino and Bezzina seek to justify the role of Catholic schools as publicly funded institutions in Canada, to explain why the distinctive characteristics of Catholic education are particularly well suited for serving at-risk youth, and to provide a resource that will enable teachers to “re-culture” their schools to meet the public mandate. The volume presents six foundational elements of Catholic education and relates these to the mission of reaching out to at-risk students.

Throughout the United States, Canada, and perhaps worldwide, there is much discussion about the best ways to address the “achievement gap” that exists between those students who benefit from the highest levels of economic and social resources and those who lack access to those resources and

struggle with lower levels of academic achievement. These are the students described by Cosentino and Bezzina as “at risk” for failing to complete a high school diploma and find meaningful work. This document does not offer a prescriptive plan or specific curriculum for working with these youth, but does provide a guiding educational philosophy based upon the Gospel and Catholic social teaching. Reflective questions are provided for educators to help them think more deeply about the ways in which the principles of Catholic education are carried out in their schools and how they personally contribute to the realization of this vision.

While many schools, especially public schools, seek to address the achievement gap by a singular focus on academic programming, Cosentino and Bezzina point out that Catholic education embraces a holistic approach to educational development and personal formation. This approach does not differ from some secular schools that also emphasize service learning, work-based learning, and socio-emotional learning as complements to academic learning or as ways to reduce motivational, social, or emotional barriers to academic achievement. Work-based learning, for example, is generally intended to help students understand the relationship between what they are learning in school and their vocational futures and thereby to instill a level of motivation among youth who otherwise lack direction. What emerges as unique or distinctive about Catholic education is the desire to provide students with a sense of values that gives meaning to their education. The mission of Catholic education is to help youth understand a broader purpose and meaning in life, and to foster a sense of hope. In addition to educational, employment, social, and health outcomes for students, Catholic education is concerned with spiritual and moral formation. Indeed, this broader sense of purpose and meaning might be a critical educational dimension that serves to inspire and motivate youth as they are struggling with the academic or social aspects of their lives or when they entertain doubts about the economic pay-offs for their education.

This document was written for educators. Just as students in Catholic schools are taught that financial rewards are not the central meaning of life or work, this paper prompts Catholic educators to reflect on the purpose and meaning of their work. Staff are encouraged to recognize the unique gifts and talents of each student and to model a stewardship of God’s gifts on personal, group, and environmental levels. This also entails a commitment to the well-being of youth as products of God’s creation. Schools and classrooms are intended to be places where young people can nurture their hopes and dreams. Caring adults need to listen to and support students to “become all they are called to be” (p.16). A sense of hope, caring, and empowerment instilled

by the school faculty represents, in my view, another essential element of Catholic schools in motivating youth and fostering personal development. The notion that one should seek to and can transform the world in Christ communicates to youth a sense of empowerment and hope.

In sum, the authors are successful in describing how the distinctive and foundational elements of Catholic education are well suited for the preparation of at-risk youth for a meaningful school and work life. The authors did raise several notions that I felt deserved further exploration. For example, the authors noted the importance of collaboration with families, while also noting that most parents of Catholic school students are of different faiths. They may also differ by ethnicity and social class. I think that some attention should be given to how the schools can best work across race, ethnicity, social class, culture, and faith in ways that respect the dignity of individuals and their backgrounds. Similarly, as teachers reflect on the many questions raised by the authors, they might also be encouraged to reflect on their own social privilege and how that might impact their work.

In an era of evidence-based practice, this document is devoid of assessment findings. This was not the purpose of this paper. Nevertheless, the reader is left to search elsewhere for evidence as to whether the foundational elements of Catholic education actually contribute to an effective and superior method for meeting the needs of at-risk youth. Systematic, formative, and outcome evaluation can be helpful in enhancing educational practice. Research findings could also significantly add to the argument, set forth by Cosentino and Bezzina, that Catholic education offers distinct benefits in serving at-risk youth.

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Reviewed by John M. Crawford, F.S.C.

What obligations do Catholic schools have to provide effective education to students who are “at risk?” This provocative question stands at the heart of a thought-provoking educational pamphlet from Canada. *A Place of Honour: Reaching Out to Students at Risk in Ontario Catholic Schools* is a publication of the Catholic Association of Religious and Family Life Educators of Ontario co-authored by Tony Cosentino and Joe Bezzina. By Cosentino and Bezzina’s own admission, this document functions on two levels: first, to

explore why at-risk students are essential to the mission of Catholic education; and also, to “justify our existence as a fully-funded educational system” (p. 2). While the latter purpose clearly is a political issue in Canada, where full government funding of Catholic schools exists as a reality, which many Catholic educators in the United States might envy, the first reason raises issues that challenge all educators to examine how well we serve some of our most needy children.

Cosentino and Bezzina employ a comparative methodology in their essay. They present examples of mandates from their provincial educational ministry or ideas taken from educational experts, and then contrast them with insights from Church documents or spiritual writers. Cosentino and Bezzina suggest that the Catholic heritage challenges educators to go beyond state or provincial-level acceptability standards. The Catholic belief in the inherent worth of all persons, especially persons at risk, invites educators to “see beyond appearances and test scores to recognize their indelible dignity as a son or daughter of God” (p. 5). Catholic schools answer to a dual set of expectations from both the state and their faith community.

What is distinctive about Catholic schools? Cosentino and Bezzina observe that their attraction derives from “witnessing to a life of faith” and concern for the “whole person,” rather than being “market-driven” (p. 5). The authors reference principles outlined in the document of The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Catholic School* (1977). Catholic schools emphasize “Christian formation” (p. 6) of persons, reflecting three elements: (a) vocation, (b) community, and (c) service. Cosentino and Bezzina consider the intersection of these elements with state-mandated requirements to prepare at-risk students to find employment. From the distinctively Catholic perspective, work is a fundamental right of human dignity, a primary means of supporting self, family, and society, and reflects the universal vocation to holiness. That all baptized persons are called to be co-creators with God to usher in God’s reign is no less true of those people whose unique challenges or needs may put them “at risk” (Cosentino & Bezzina, 2008, p. 17). Ultimately, Cosentino and Bezzina believe that Catholic schools operate through the “optic of grace,” accompanying students for the few years they are enrolled to “help them identify and become good stewards of the gifts that all of us have received” (p. 20).

This positive perspective about the dignity of persons finding their way in the world, assisted by the agency of Catholic schools, represents a “concrete act of hope.” Catholic school communities witness to hope “in the way they treat those who struggle in their midst” (p. 22). In this, Catholic schools may offer a necessary corrective to what contemporary culture understands as “success.” For example, Cosentino and Bezzina make reference to *Pathways*

to *Student Success*, a publication of the Ontario Ministry of Education (2003), which defines student success by standards such as remaining in school, executing the transition between elementary and secondary schooling, and eventually finding employment. While these goals are significant, the authors suggest that Catholic schools offer a wider perspective, beyond achieving certain levels on test scores, or enrolling in particular courses, or the percent of students matriculating to postsecondary schooling. Rather, Cosentino and Bezzina call for a “re-culturing” of schools that “rethink what it means to support students who are considered at risk” (p. 25). They start with the terminology “at risk” itself, inviting us to “resist at all costs the temptation to associate students with permanent labels” (p. 25). While the authors value the Ontario Ministry of Education guidelines, which insist upon “experiential learning components” or “literacy, numeracy, and life and employability skills,” they argue that these and other expectations must be informed by the Catholic context “that every person comes into the world with a precious, unique, and irreplaceable role to play in God’s plan for the human family” (p. 26). Obviously, government-mandated guidelines must be met (particularly to continue to receive Canadian funding), but more is required in Catholic schools.

Cosentino and Bezzina argue that the religious education component of Catholic schools “stands at the centre of what we are all about” (p. 27). For students at risk, this requires Catholic schools to be communities with “a spirit of liberty and charity,” that enable young people to grow into their “own personality” as baptized persons, and which “orientate the whole of human culture to the message of salvation” (p. 27). The authors propose that the unique perspective Catholic schools bring to education are as “Eucharistic people.” As such, Catholic schools reflect what Pope Benedict XVI affirms in *God Is Love (Deus Caritas Est)* as “the concrete practice of love” (as cited in Cosentino & Bezzina, 2008, p. 29).

A Place of Honour presents many intriguing challenges to Catholic educators. Cosentino and Bezzina acknowledge that it is difficult to sustain a Catholic perspective in education when most of a school’s enrollment is made up of unchurched families whose own worldviews may more closely resemble a “post-Christian culture” (p. 9). Cosentino and Bezzina admit that their reflections tilt more toward examining “why” welcome at-risk students in Canadian Catholic schools than “how” to do it. For all Catholic educators, however, these authors encourage us to consider our welcome for the neediest in our institutions. How do we in Catholic schools on either side of our North American border reach out and engage parents of students, all of whom are at risk to some degree, to help create a Christian-Catholic formative community in our schools? For us in the United States, it might be imperative to

ask why parents opt for Catholic schools when their own practice is not always informed by participation in Church, and likewise, without the support of government subsidies to fund their children's education, with all of the attendant issues that school finances impose upon our ability to serve children well. Similarly, we Catholic educators in the United States could explore how effectively we meet the needs of students who face physical, emotional, or intellectual challenges. Have we been dismissive of them because of lack of funding? Within school communities, how do we make a place of welcome and encouragement for children who are "different?" Do we extend the graced moment to ourselves and all of our students to become a Eucharistic people by embracing students who may demand more from us? These are just a few of the questions that Cosentino and Bezzina's pamphlet invite us to ponder.

References

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The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling In America

Jonathan Kozol
 Three Rivers Press, 2005
 \$14.95, 432 pages

Reviewed by Patrick Fennessy

Many United States history courses spend a great deal of time trumpeting the advances of American education during the Civil Rights movement. *Brown v. Board of Education* is celebrated as a landmark decision that desegregated schools and brought in an era of racial harmony. As a part of their study of this era, some may even watch melodramatic movies that tell the tough, but inspiring stories of specific schools and their integration. Unfortunately, most of the nation's inner-city public schools have slowly returned to the segregated institutions that *Brown* sought to terminate.